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# First record of Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* for Nepal

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We describe a winter-plumaged Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* (use of 'Diver' rather than 'Loon' follows author's preference) that was present on Koshi Barrage, Nepal on at least 15–25 February 2002. This sighting, which has been accepted by the Nepal Rare Birds Committee, constitutes the first record of the species for Nepal and only the second for the Indian subcontinent.

The Koshi Barrage (26°20'N 86°46'E, 65 m) is well known as an important site for wintering waterbirds in Nepal (Inskipp and Inskipp 1991). Unfortunately it is presently facing increasing disturbance from the expanding human population, and threats from overfishing and hunting are growing (Inskipp and

Inskipp 2001). Nevertheless, it remains a fixed point on the itineraries of most birdwatching groups that visit Nepal and its avifauna is correspondingly well documented. Over 460 species of bird have been recorded from the area (Baral 2000).

In February 2002, SA was with a group of British birdwatchers visiting Nepal, with DG as a local guide. The group spent the afternoon of 15 February on the embankment north of the Barrage on the east side of the Koshi river. The weather was hot and cloudless and there was no noticeable wind. The visibility was good: the embankment is well raised (water levels were comparatively low in the winter of 2001–2002) and so there was relatively little haze despite the heat. Many

wintering waterbirds were present on the barrage and among them SA noticed a diver *Gavia* sp. that he identified as a Red-throated Diver. He announced the bird to the other people present and although it dived regularly everybody saw it well. The identity was not in doubt. Assuming that the species had previously been recorded from the area, the group paid little further attention to it.

In the afternoon of 18 February, GT was scanning the birds on Koshi Barrage together with a group of birdwatchers from Austria, with Suchit Basnit as a local guide. Conditions were similar to those three days previously. The Red-throated Diver was still present. Again, all members of the group looked at the bird and concurred with the identification. DG noted the bird again on 25 February, after which it was not to our knowledge seen again. The following description has been compiled from notes taken by SA on 15 February and by GT on 18 February. It should be noted that the two records agree on all points except for the colour of the bill, which SA recorded as 'dark' and GT noted as 'pale'. The discrepancy presumably relates to the light conditions and/or the angle of view (see, for example, the photographs in Appleby *et al.* 1986).

The bird's posture showed clearly that it was a diver. The characteristic 'low' position in the water and the long, flat body were immediately obvious. When the bird dived, which it did occasionally for up to about 20 seconds at a time, it did so without first rising out of the water. Also evident was the long neck, which appeared thick (in comparison with that of, e.g., Great-crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*) and straight, in contrast to the 'S' shape usually shown by the necks of Black-throated *G. arctica*, Pacific *G. pacifica*, Common *G. immer* and Yellow-billed *G. adamsii* Divers. The following features were noted. The face, throat and sides of the neck appeared white, with the white extending along the underparts to the flanks. The rear flanks were slightly greyish but still paler than the upperparts. The dark eye could be clearly seen within the white of the face; the grey of the crown did not extend as far as the eye. The crown, nape, hindneck and upperparts appeared uniformly pale grey: the distance was unfortunately too great for any pattern on the mantle or wings to be discerned. The bill was held pointed upwards at an angle of about 30° and was thin (compared with, for example, that of Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* or Black-throated Diver). The culmen looked straight but the lower mandible kinked upwards towards the tip. The head appeared flat, in contrast to the steep forehead shown by other species of diver.

This description is sufficient to eliminate any other species (Appleby *et al.* 1986). We were unfortunately not able to determine the age of the bird: the plumage showed none of the features characteristic of juveniles (e.g. darker head and neck, occasional greyish appearance of head and eye almost enclosed within dark of crown) but these are lost in the first moult, which generally takes place before February. The resulting first-winter plumage is very difficult to distinguish in the field from that of adults in winter (Appleby *et al.* 1986).

The Red-throated Diver is an holarctic species, breeding generally north of 50°N and far into the high

arctic. It winters mainly along the north coasts of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as in several major lakes and seas such as the Great Lakes and the Black, Caspian and Mediterranean Seas (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The birds that breed in western Siberia are believed to winter mainly in the Black and Caspian Seas but little is known of the migration routes of those breeding in eastern Siberia (V. E. Flint in Ilyichev and Flint 1982). Some migrants have been encountered in central Asia, raising the possibility that the species winters there, but the vast majority of the birds presumably spend the winter in the Pacific (Dementiev and Gladkov 1951). The wintering areas in the eastern Pacific lie mainly within the U.S.A., although the Red-throated Diver occurs as far south as northern Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995). The situation in the western Pacific is less well understood. Brazil (1991) lists the species as a fairly common winter visitor to Japan but it is rare in China, where it has been recorded from the north-east of the country and along the east coast to Guangdong and northern Taiwan (Cheng 1987). It is cited as occurring as a winter vagrant to Hong Kong by King *et al.* (1975), presumably based on three published records of divers in Hong Kong coastal waters. As the most southerly wintering species, Red-throated was considered 'apparently the most likely to occur' (Viney and Phillipps 1988). However, the observation of a Pacific Diver offshore from Hong Kong on 19 November 1997 (Leader 1999) shows that other species of diver occur. The sightings previously attributed to Red-throated Diver (e.g. R. E. Hale in Webster 1967) must therefore be called into question.

The Indian subcontinent is shielded from the route to the normal wintering areas by the Himalayas, and sightings of Red-throated Diver are predictably rare. On 17 November 1901 a fisherman off the coast of Ormara in Pakistan (25°12'N 64°39'E) brought ashore a Red-throated Diver he had killed as it surfaced near his boat. The skin is housed in the British Museum collection. The fisherman claimed to have seen several individuals in the same place and said that 'a few visit the coast occasionally' (Ticehurst 1927). Despite his assertion, there have been no further sightings from Pakistan nor indeed from anywhere else in the subcontinent until the present record.

It is naturally intriguing to speculate how the bird we saw reached Nepal. The winter of 2001–2002 saw several other rare visitors to the country, at least some of which had strayed well to the east of their normal wintering ranges. Among these were Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*, which was recorded from the area of Koshi Barrage in the latter half of February (Giri and Choudhary 2002), Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*, large flocks of which were regularly observed on Phulchowki, Kathmandu in January and February (Giri and Choudhary 2002), and Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*, which in February was recorded for the first time in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (Tebb *et al.* 2004). It is tempting to propose that some unusual weather phenomenon was responsible for these records. If so, perhaps the Red-throated Diver was somehow driven off-course from its route to the Caspian Sea or to some as yet unknown wintering area in Central Asia.



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## Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*: first record for the Philippines

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On 8 September 2002, at around 16h00, D. Salamagos observed a large black bird on the cliffs along the coastal road from Basco to Mahatao on Batan Island, Philippines. At 19h00 on his return journey he saw the bird again. It showed signs of exhaustion and he was able to catch it (D. Salamagos verbally 2003). The bird was put in a cage and later identified as a Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* by staff of the Provincial Environmental and Natural Resource Office (PENRO) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Following local informants, and despite our initial skepticism of the occurrence of a vulture in the Batanes Islands, we were able to confirm this identification and photograph the bird on 17 August 2003. Unmistakably a vulture, the bird was huge with a uniformly blackish plumage, blackish down on the head, a large pale bluish-grey cere and bill with a black tip, some areas of pale bare skin on the cheeks and immediately above the eye, dark irises, and grey scaly legs. It was aged as a juvenile Cinereous Vulture by the uniformly blackish plumage and blackish down on the head. Adults are dark brown, with grey-white down on the crown and cheeks, and a mauve to bluish cere (Ferguson-Lees and Christie

2001). The bird was still being held in captivity in Basco in April 2004 at least.

Cinereous Vulture occurs in open habitats in hilly and mountainous areas, especially grassland, semi-desert, scrub and open forest the southern Palearctic from Spain through Turkey and Afghanistan to southern Siberia, northern China and Mongolia. The species is largely sedentary in most of its range, but Asian populations are somewhat more nomadic and partly migratory: some northern breeders move south in winter, with a few reaching the Indian subcontinent, southern China and Korea (Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001). In Taiwan, 190 km north of the Batanes Islands, the species is listed as a vagrant (Chinese Wild Bird Federation 1995). Globally, the species is listed as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2001).

The bird was not ringed nor were its wings clipped, and we have no reason to suppose that it was an escaped cagebird. Juvenile Cinereous Vultures are known to disperse more widely (Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001), so it seems likely that it was of wild origin.

Local informants did not relate the occurrence of the bird to weather patterns, but typhoon 'Sinlaku'